

1 Peter Introduction

1 Peter 1:1-2

At the start of a new year we are starting a new series looking at the apostle Peter's first letter: 1 Peter. And 1 Peter was written to Christians with whom you and I would have plenty in common: Peter calls them exiles – away from their homeland, and we'll see what he means by that. As Christians they were grappling with how to live in a society, that of the first century Roman Empire, that was increasingly hostile to the Christian faith, just like us in the secular post-Christian west. And they faced the issue of suffering. For them that was persecution that was beginning to increase in intensity. Most of us don't face intense persecution, but you will encounter low-grade hostility in the school, or university or workplace because you're a Christian. And the lessons that we can learn from Peter here teach us a whole load about handling adversity well in other areas. Because when you encounter difficulty and adversity and suffering – the questions you face are the same ones they faced: why has God allowed this? Has God designed this or is it from the devil? Do I embrace it or resist it? How do you handle suffering and suffer well for Jesus Christ. Those are some of the issues Peter addresses in this letter.

But this morning we are just going to look at the opening two verses and they are an excellent way to start the New Year.

1 Peter 1:1-2

Peter tells us things there about himself, about the Christians he's writing to, and about God, and we are going to look at each of those in turn.

Peter:

What you have on the page in front of you is a letter written by Peter, written by a man who graduated from the greatest 3 year apprenticeship scheme ever devised, a man who knew, lived alongside and was taught by Jesus Christ himself. A man who Jesus set apart to be an apostle.

And that is all that Peter says about himself here: Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ. It's all he needs to say about himself. Peter an ambassador; a man sent with a message, a man sent to be a message bearer for Jesus Christ. And all of us are messengers for something. This coming year, to people watching, your life will speak eloquently about what matters most to you. All of us are mastered by something, this year every one of us will spend our life for one cause or another. Peter was mastered by Jesus Christ, he was Christ's apostle and he spent his life for the cause of Jesus Christ. There is no higher cause to live for. You were created to glorify God with your life. Living for your own or someone else's glory in 2010 will be a waste of your life. At the start of this year make it your prayer 'God I want to live to bring glory to Christ, to savour and treasure Him above everything else; to be your messenger to a world which needs to hear your message.'

By the time Peter writes this letter in about 63 AD he has been serving Jesus Christ for 30 years. So what he writes here he writes from experience. He has faced imprisonment and flogging for Jesus. Within 2 years of writing this letter he will give his life for Christ during the persecutions of the emperor Nero. So when Peter writes about suffering you're not reading the words of a man sat in a comfy arm chair, or some prosperity teacher jetting around the globe in a private jet.

You are reading the words of an apostle of Jesus Christ, a man who knew what it was to suffer.

And Peter's own name is an indication of the transformation that can happen to a man's life through the gospel of Jesus Christ. His first name was Simon, but when Simon was the first to realise who Jesus was: 'you're the Son of God' Jesus gave him the name Peter – which means Rock – 'on this rock I will build my church' Jesus said. But then at the crucial moment, with Jesus facing imminent death, Peter blows it and denies knowing anything about him. And the Rock has turned into sand, into a coward, whose one aim is to save his own skin. And Peter would have been left on the scrap heap of life, a failed has-been, if Jesus hadn't shown him grace and restored him and restated His call on Peter's life. And the fact that Peter is writing this letter, as a loving shepherd of the churches, and not gutting fish on a Galilean beach is wonderful testimony to the restoring, renewing grace of Jesus Christ and the forgiveness of sins found in the gospel.

Whatever personal defeats and failures marked the past year for you; whatever sin, or coldness of heart toward God and His word; whatever wrong priorities you made in the year gone: the gospel of Christ is your hope for 2010, just as it was for Peter before you. Hope for freedom from failure and defeat of sin. Hope for years of fruitful service. Half-baked New Year resolutions have no power to break the shackles of past failures, but the gospel of Jesus Christ does. Understanding that your sins are forgiven because Christ has suffered for them breaks the power of guilt of sin and failure. You don't have to carry that guilt into 2010. Understanding that you are accepted by grace and you don't have to try and earn His favour delivers you from striving. Growing in your understanding of the immensity of God's love for you in Christ becomes the motivator for your prayer life and bible reading to grow in intensity and pleasure, not out of duty, but out of delight. Seeing Christ as infinitely more valuable than anything else becomes your weapon in resisting temptation, it becomes the breath on the embers of your heart, to fan passion for God into flame, and it becomes the reason to live for his glory and not your own.

And Peter knows the power of the grace and the mercy of God in the gospel of Christ personally. And that's why he writes what he writes to these Christians.

The Christians:

And Peter writes this letter (v1) to the elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia: provinces of what is now Turkey. And Peter describes these Christians in three ways. They are elect, they are exiles and they are part of the dispersion.

Originally, the dispersion, the Diaspora, referred to Jews scattered across the world. But now Peter includes gentile Christians like us in this great scattering of God's people. And you can view this dispersion as a thing of weakness: God's people are scattered, isolated: one here, one there. 'I'm the only Christian in my school or my department'. But God consistently uses scattering to spread the gospel.

It was because of the original Jewish dispersion that in every major town and city of the empire there was a synagogue ready for the preaching of the gospel. After Pentecost when Jewish believers from all over the world got converted, they dispersed back to their home countries taking the good news with them: seeding the gospel back to those synagogues. When the persecutions fell upon the young church at Jerusalem, scattering the Christians, it scattered them like seed to spread the gospel.

So though it can be hard to stand up for Christ when you are the only one, you can set your hope on God because you are part of this deliberate scattering of His people as seed throughout the world so that the gospel can germinate and bear fruit as you bear witness to Him in 2010.

But they're not just dispersed. They're also exiles. Not because they've been evicted from their home countries, but because the gospel brings about an inevitable dislocation between the way a disciple of Jesus Christ sees things and the way the world sees them. That was true in the first century Roman Empire with its idol worship and it is true in the 21st Century with its idol worship. When you become a Christian your world-view changes and what you worship changes. You don't see things the way your friends or colleagues do. You're an exile. When your colleagues think you're mad, when your friends mock you, when your family laugh at you, when you don't take joy in the things you used to do, it's not because you're strange, it's because God has saved you from the world and you are an exile. You're away from your heavenly home and you are waiting for the fulfilment and the coming of the kingdom of God.

And Peter calls them and us: *elect* exiles. And elect means chosen and called out. And that is a wonderful truth to start a new year with. If you are a Christian, God has chosen you and called you out of the world. Not because of anything special about you, not because you were better than anyone else, but simply because He is a God of grace who chooses to show grace and mercy to people like us who don't deserve it and had our backs turned to him.

When I was a kid at primary school the teacher would pick two captains who could then choose from the line of classmates who they wanted on their football team. And I was useless at football, and I remember longing to be chosen and dreading being the last one. Well, if you're a Christian God has picked you, not because you were good, but because He is good and has chosen you and picked you out to shower His grace and mercy upon.

And Peter knows that to be true from his own experience. It was Jesus who called him to follow Him. It was Jesus who restored him when he had fallen on his face. Peter knew what it was to be chosen by the grace of God, a man who didn't deserve it. And this doctrine of election, because that's what we're talking about here, that it is God who in His mercy and grace chooses those who don't deserve to be chosen, gives us great hope for whatever the coming year throws at us. Because it means your security in God does not rest on your decision for Christ. It doesn't rest on your ability to stand in the trials of life. It rests on His sovereign choosing of you, and He will never cast you aside.

And if you're not yet a Christian God's offer of life to you is not based on you impressing Him. It is based on His choosing you, on His free gift to you. And that means you don't have to clean yourself up first, He doesn't choose you because you look good, He chooses you because He's good. It is His free gift of grace to you, your part is to receive it and respond with faith to His call. I would encourage you to do that at the start of this year.

So Peter has introduced himself and he's talked about who they are. Now he teaches us about God.

God:

When Peter starts teaching about God in v2 he dives in at the deep end and tells us that God is a Trinity. He doesn't use that word, but in one short sentence he brings God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit together: One God existing eternally in three persons and all involved in your salvation: v1: To those who are elect exiles of the dispersion... v2: According to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood.

These Christians, and you and me, are elect and chosen because of God the Father's foreknowledge. God the Father knew you and loved you before the world was formed. Before ever your mother and father got together, before ever you were a twinkle in anyone else's eye, God the Father saw you and chose you, by his foreknowledge. If your sense of self worth is dependent on yourself, or your success, or on what others think of you, you will always be at the mercy of events. But when your self-worth is rooted in the gospel, in God's foreknowledge of you, loving and choosing you before you had any chance to impress Him, even though He knew you would fail multiple times, then you can know joy and peace in your heart because it isn't resting on your performance but on His eternal, unchanging love and choosing of you in Jesus Christ.

But when Peter writes 'by the foreknowledge of God the Father' it's not just referring to them being elect and chosen. They are also exiles by His foreknowledge. And that means that whatever these men and women faced, whatever you face in terms of being away from home, or in opposition for being a Christian, whatever you are grappling with now in your life, and whatever comes at you in the coming year is all with and by His foreknowledge. Nothing takes Him by surprise. He is not left scabbling around thinking 'what do I do now?' So you can face it in the security that God your Father knows it and has designed it. It is all in His sovereign purpose and plan. He sees it all, the end from the beginning, and He works it all for your good.

Then Peter says that God the Holy Spirit is at work in your life for your sanctification. If you don't know what the word sanctification means, it means to be made holy. And that is the work of the Holy Spirit in your life.

In the moment when you first put your trust in Jesus Christ, and you put your faith in Him to save you, the Bible says that you are born again by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit makes you alive to God, you put your trust in Christ and in that

instant you move from being condemned to being counted as righteous in Christ; as holy in the sight of God.

But the Spirit doesn't just leave it there. He doesn't simply clothe you in Christ's righteousness and holiness, but leave your life underneath the cloak unchanged. For the rest of your life the Holy Spirit goes on sanctifying you. He works in your heart to change your attitudes, your ways of thinking and your behaviours. He deals with your putting other things as first in your life before God and then every other sin that flows from that: your anger and your lust and your covetousness. He works in your heart to cause you to increasingly delight in Christ and to treasure Him above everything else. He is constantly at work to change you and mould you to be more like Jesus.

And so that means that you don't need to be standing still in your life. Doesn't matter how long you've been a Christian, the year that lies ahead is not defined by what has gone before. There need be no stagnation. If you will yield to and cooperate with and respond to the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in your life: dealing with sin when He convicts you of it, responding to His impulses to pray and read the word of God; allowing Him to change and mould your thinking, then the coming year can be one of growth in godliness and of usefulness to the Master. That's why Peter says in v2: 'in the sanctification of the Spirit, *for obedience to Jesus Christ*'. That's the obedience of first responding to the gospel, and it's the lifelong, growing obedience of a disciple.

Some people will argue that if you talk about grace too much it leads to wrong behaviour: that if you teach people that they are saved by the grace of God, and not by their good behaviour they end up behaving bad. That is so wrong. If someone has genuinely trusted Christ, and seen that they are saved and made right with God by His grace, that it is all a gracious gift from God, that will result in a life of joyful obedience. Not to earn God's favour but because of His favour. Not out of duty but out of delight.

And all of this is being brought about in your life by the Holy Spirit. You cannot live the Christian life without the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who causes you to be born again in the first place. It's the Spirit who sanctifies you: makes you more like Jesus step-by-step, day-by-day. It is the Spirit who opens your eyes to see things in His word. It is the Spirit who helps you when you pray, and when you can't find the words to express what is going on in your heart it's then that the Spirit prays through your groans. It's the Spirit who equips you to stand in the fight. It's the Spirit who gives you the gifts to serve and bless and encourage others in the body of Christ. You are absolutely dependent on the Spirit to become and to be a Christian. So let 2010 be a year that rather than resisting Him you humble yourself and get in step and stay in step with the Spirit.

And Peter finishes the Trinity with Jesus: 'The foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, *for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood*'. Later on in this letter Peter tells us that he was an eyewitness of Christ's sufferings. He saw the blood. And steeped in the Old Testament as he was he knew that Christ's bloody death on the cross was the fulfilment of every Old Testament sacrifice. He knew the power of the blood of Christ: that like the blood of the Passover lamb painted on door posts in Egypt Christ's blood saves from

death and redeems us from the power of the enemy. That like the blood sprinkled on the people of Israel at the giving of the law setting them apart as God's covenant people so the blood of Christ has brought you into covenant relationship with God. That as the blood sprinkled on the person defiled by skin disease made them clean, so the blood of Christ cleanses us from everything that separates us from God; and that as the blood of animal sacrifices was sprinkled on the altar and the mercy seat in the temple for forgiveness of sins, so the blood of Christ has earned for us forgiveness from every sin.

But this sprinkling with the blood of Christ is not simply a past event. It's ongoing. That doesn't mean Christ goes on being sacrificed, but it means that Christ's death goes on being effective and powerful in your life. We are chosen by the foreknowledge of God for sanctification and obedience, but that obedience is always going to fail. Even as the Holy Spirit continues to transform us into the image of Jesus we are going to fail and fall on our faces time and again, but we go on being sprinkled by the blood of Christ. The once for all sacrifice of Jesus goes on cleansing us from sin, freeing us from guilt, releasing us from condemnation. We will fail but the blood of Christ never fails. We constantly fall short, the blood of Christ never falls short.

That is why Peter can end this greeting with 'Grace and Peace be multiplied to you.' The opposite of grace is working for God's favour. The opposite of peace is gut-twisted worry that you aren't doing enough, that you don't make the grade. But knowing that you have been chosen by the foreknowledge of God, that the circumstances of your life are all under His control, that He has made you holy in His sight and is making you holy, that the blood of Christ is your cleansing and defence and forgiveness, means that you can know and receive the ever multiplying grace and peace of God in your heart, today and throughout the coming year.